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V. S. Naipaul: The Development of His View of Man

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V. S. NAIPAUL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIS VIEW OF MAN

(TITLE)

BY

KIM LIN FORRESTER

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

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V. S. NAIPAUL
THE DEVELOPMENT OF
HIS VIEW OF MAN

BY

KIM LIN FORRESTER

B. A. in Spanish, Eastern Illinois University, 1973

ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in English at the Graduate School
of Eastern Illinois University

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1977

The purpose of this thesis is to examine V.S. Naipaul's view of the human condition as it develops from a local and comic perspective to a more universal and tragic awareness. The first group, entitled "The Mystic, the Politician, and other Eccentrics," is comprised of his first three novels--The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, and Miguel Street. Each work is a highly satiric examination of a society in which the author perceives no sign of any intellectual depth as he moves rapidly from one humorous episode to another. The characters are generally of the lower class and uneducated, Their reactions are the result of a picaresque instinct for survival rather than thought.

The second group, entitled "The Assertion of Hope," contains his next four works--A House for Mr. Biswas, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, The Mimic Men, and A Flag on the Island. These books represent a period when Naipaul asserts hope and sees positive indication of inner strength. The structure of these works is less episodic, and the humor changes from mere literal play on words to more sophisticated irony. The characters impose meaning in their lives and are aware of the human dilemma, of boredom, and of uselessness.

The third group, "The Darker Vision," includes the short story collection In A Free State and Naipaul's latest novel, Guerrillas. The characters of this last

have more depth and act on a level other than mere instinct. From a perspective that is not limited by ignorance or illiteracy, and therefore similar to that of the second group, they face the question of human existence. What differentiates the third group from the second is that Naipaul's later characters have no positive resolution to their problems. The optimism of the second group is not enduring.

One detail which emerges in examining the thesis is that Naipaul's female characters fail to develop the inner cohesion of men. Like the Hemingway heroines they fall into two distinct categories:the wife/mother, and the man-eater/dragon lady who, robbed of the natural functions of motherhood, is a confusion of values. Brought up in the Hindu religion until his departure for England in 1950, Naipaul writes from memory about women who are necessarily weak and submissive. His non-Hindu female characters are less submissive but also noticeably less happy.

The method used to examine this thesis is an analysis of the main characters. In attempting a thesis such as this, one must of necessity deal chiefly with the characters of the longer fiction work. Though some mention is made of some key short stories, these are treated in far less detail. Reference is made to Naipaul's non-fiction works, The Middle Passage, An Area of Darkness, and The Overcrowded Barracoon.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The declaration of independence by Trinidad, Jamaica, and Guyana in the early 60's was also the beginning of a concerted move for economic and social change. The West Indian's vision of the world and his concept of himself had been irrevocably altered by numerous external factors--the rigid enforcement of British immigration policy, political developments in South Africa and Rhodesia, the civil rights issues of the United States, and the Black Power movement.

National consciousness sought a native literature to add to those art forms already in existence--the steelband, the limbo, and the calypso--and literature seemed the next logical place. The books that were being studied in the public schools (where literary tastes are born) were written and published abroad. High school students prepared for an examination administered by an English university. Thus, prior to the 60's, no local author was very widely read.

This is not to say that there was no writing by West Indians prior to the declaration of independence, but generally this creativity was directed to producing copies of what was popular in British and American literature. What was available as West Indian literature was the work of an isolated few who wrote without the stimulus

or support of public interest. Among the writers who had published works which received national attention with independence was the Trinidadian writer, V.S. Naipaul.

Naipaul has lived in England since 1950, but he has continued to write about the West Indies. While some nationalistic critics view him as a pro-West Indian writer, satirizing those qualities which need to be corrected for national advancement, other critics consider him too far removed from the West Indies to represent West Indian society truthfully.

Much of the negative criticism that has been directed at Naipaul by his fellow West Indians focuses on the fact that he has poked sly fun at the very essence of the Caribbean experience. Satire, according to A Handbook to Literature, is a "literary manner which blends a critical attitude with humor and wit to the end that human institutions or humanity may be improved."[1] Naipaul uses satire though he is cognizant that Trinidadians wish "to be heroically portrayed"[2] and that satire does not permit heroic portraits. His function as he sees it is to depict the Trinidadian as he is, not as he believes himself to be, "to tell him who he is and where he now stands."[3]

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[1]William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, Inc., 1936), p. 436.

[2]V.S. Naipaul, The Middle Passage (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 74.

[3]Ibid., p. 73.

Though the majority of West Indians may be unable to define satire correctly, it is an integral part of Caribbean life. As a way of looking at the world, it is probably the most common among the islanders. "Picong," which is the local word for satire, is a regular feature of every streetcorner "lime" or loiter: "Mr. Biswas lurks around every corner, his voice is in the crowd...discussing, arguing, interested, alive."[4] "Picong" is the inescapable ingredient of the calypso. It is bold laughter in the face of any situation that cannot be changed or mastered.

The cultivation of eccentricity, given the sure way of attracting at least the attention of the loiterers, is favored. "Justice men" roam the streets, drive invisible cars, or sit on pavements with bandages over imaginary wounds. There is always some "bacchanal" or scandal being related in the news when some imdividual, filled with the strength of Tarzan or the virility of Bogart, acts out absurdity and ends up in the jail or the hospital. To the person who is unfamiliar with the West Indies, much of what Naipaul describes seems fantasy, but it is very real.

Logically, no criticism, whether it is moral or institutional, can be posited unless the critic perceives

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[4]Mary Slater, The Caribbean Islands (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 217.

a correlative end of improvement. What Naipaul would like his characters to strive toward is a perspective of themselves as belonging to a world upon which meaning must be imposed. Slavery and indentured labor may account for much of the irresponsibility and apathy, but where he sees the resultant absurdity, Naipaul is quick to point it out. His satiric point seems to be that unless the West Indian can perceive the absurdity of what he does now, he will never possess any future cohesion or integrity. Thus, his satiric manner offers not unreasoning forgiveness but analysis, not condemnation but hope.

Naipaul's fiction may be divided into three groups which correspond to the chronological stages of his own development of an awareness of the human predicament. In the case of the West Indian this is a special one because of the aftermath of slavery, indentured labor, and colonialism.

The first group, from the years 1957 to 1959, is comprised of The Mystic Masseur, The Suffrage of Elvira, and Miguel Street. Each work is an examination of a static society in which the author perceives no sign of any intellectual depth. The characters are generally of the lower class and uneducated. The action is very episodic as Naipaul moves quickly from one humorous situation to

the next. At this point Naipaul merely discerns foibles but does not indicate the direction of change.

The second group contains his four books published between the years 1961 to 1967. They are A House for Mr. Biswas, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, A Flag on the Island, and The Mimic Men. They represent a period when Naipaul asserts hope and sees positive indications of inner strength represented by Mr. Stone's confidence "that in time calm would come to him again."[5] For the first time Naipaul includes main characters who are not West Indians and his concerns move then from purely local ones to those of wider human interest. The structure is less episodic and in the novel, The Mimic Men, moves from the present to the past and back again.

The third group, written between 1971 and 1975, includes the short story collection, In a Free State, and the novel, Guerrillas. The characters have more depth than previous characters and think and act on a level other than mere instinct. From a perspective that is not limited by ignorance or illiteracy, they face the problem of human existence expressed in Peter Roche's cry, "O God, why is any of us allowed to live at all?"[6] What

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[5]V.S. Naipaul, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 160.

[6]V.S. Naipaul, Guerrillas (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p. 255.

differentiates this group from the second is that the characters have no positive resolution of their problems. It is almost as though Naipaul means us to understand that what is positive is not enduring and that the optimism of a Stone or a Singh is very temporary.

One detail which emerges in examining the thesis that Naipaul's view of the human condition develops from a local, comic perspective to a universal, tragic awareness is that the female characters fail to develop the inner cohesion of the men. Like the Hemingway heroines, they are less important and fall into two distinct categories: the wife/mother, and the man-eater who, robbed of the natural function of motherhood, is a confusion of conflicting values. Until his departure from Trinidad at eighteen, Naipaul was brought up in the Hindu religion. Hindu custom dictates the female role as a subservient one. Thus, the women, about whom he writes from memory, are necessarily weak and submissive. Except for Margaret Springer, later female characters who are not Hindu are less weak and also noticeably less happy.

The method used to examine the thesis is an analysis of the main characters. In attempting this, one must of necessity deal chiefly with the characters of the longer fiction since it is they who can be better evaluated

for growth. Though some mention will be made of some key short stories, these will be treated in less detail. Reference will be made to pertinent information in Naipaul's non-fiction works, The Middle Passage, An Area of Darkness, and The Overcrowded Barracoon.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTIC, THE POLITICIAN, AND OTHER ECCENTRICS

If the literal meaning of the word "satire" is "a dish of mixed fruits"[7] then Naipaul offers a veritable cornucopia of characters. They range in this first group of his novels from pundits to prostitutes, from matriarchs to schoolboys. Each displays some characteristic which makes him unforgettable.

The Mystic Masseur, the first of Naipaul's works of fiction, sets the satiric tone for the next two books in this group. It is a light-hearted exposé of human folly in a society which, because of its concern with survival, finds no time for intellectualizing. Ganesh Ramsumair's success as a mystic is more the product of a series of accidents than of forethought, of chance and whim rather than of volition. He allows himself to be led into marriage with Leela, Ramlogan's daughter. As a substitute teacher in Port of Spain, Ganesh learns the trick of writing false reports of student progress. Even that job is gotten because he happens to apply when the real teacher is ill. These chance occurences support his later assertion that "it all seemed pre-ordained."[8]

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[7] A Handbook to Literature, p. 437.

[8] V.S. Naipaul, The Mystic Masseur (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1959), p. 45. Subsequent references to works by Naipaul will be made in the body of the text after a preliminary footnote.

At this point in Naipaul's writing the protagonist has no concept of anything bigger than his own environment. The extent of Ganesh's philosophy is that "everything have a reason" (p. 87). Though he claims mystical power, it is merely the intuitive picaresque concern with survival. When Ramlogan arranges a marriage between Ganesh and Leela, Ganesh exacts a high bride-price from his future father-in-law. He needs the money to support a wife. The turning point of his career comes when he is asked to remove the cloud of guilt from a boy who blames himself for the death of his brother. With soothing Hindu prayers and a cloud of smoke he does, and so begins his career as a mystic. But something or someone is always "on the point of nullifying his crafty pursuit of prestige."[9] Ganesh must constantly guard against failure, for if he fails he will lose everything--the respect of those who come from all over the island, a dependable food supply from their offerings, and perhaps even his wife who has left him once before.

Survival is still the motivator when Ganesh begins modifying his English, speaking high school English for the more educated, or local dialect for the lesser schooled. He becomes involved in politics for the very same reason.

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[9]Kingsley Amis, Spectator, May 2, 1958, p. 565.

He, not the rival pundit Narayan, must have the support of the Hindu population to guarantee a clientele. At the end of the novel, Ganesh Ramsumair becomes a colonial statesman. His cold introudction of himself to the narrator as G. Ramsay Muir is a symbolic refutation of his former identity and everything that has made him what he is.

Leela, his wife, is never more than a shadow in the background. She is the first of the Naipaul female characters whose importance will simply reflect a husband's or a lover's. Barren, and therefore without the importance of motherhood, Leela is relegated to being a housekeeper, gardener, and later to being an implausible social worker. She is "ruler in the house" (p. 69), but that is where her only power lies. This is also very true of Ganesh's aunt, The Great Belcher, whose main function once she has convinced Ganesh that he should be a mystic seems to be in bringing him messages of the doings of other would-be mystics like Narayan. Suruj Mooma, Leela's friend and confidante, can do only what her husband, Suruj Poopa, allows.

Karl Nyren sees that The Mystic Masseur "ends weakly and there is a lack of firmness in the author's attitude towards his central character."[10] That is indeed

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[10] Library Journal, 84 (May 1, 1959), 1533.

true of this first novel of Naipaul, for he is not sure of what he would like Ganesh to do. Changing his name is quite in character though, and we assume that whatever occurs from this point on, G. Ramsay Muir will continue to pursue his own interest even if it means being a chameleon.

Naipaul turns next to the political machinery in rural Trinidad in The Suffrage of Elvira. This novel deals with the relative ignorance and naivete of country voters. One is not to assume that politics is anyhow different in the cities. In fact, it is even more chaotic as is evident in Naipaul's political novel, Guerrillas. Perhaps there is an intentional pun on the words "suffrage" and "suffer-age." The latter is commonly used among the less educated for "suffering." The pun revealed, the author is able to satirize on the literal and the ironic levels those incidents which occur before and during the Elvira election. Universal suffrage only causes problems for voters as well as candidates.

Surujpat Harbans is as ineffectual a candidate as ever ran for public office in Trinidad. Shy and nervous, given to looking at the hairs on the back of his hands in moments of stress, he is catapulted into agitation by two strange white women, a black dog, and a stalled car. To Harbans all of these are warnings of impending

disaster. He lacks any political conviction but he has money and sees the possibility of power. He wins the election because he has had all the ingredients of the successful political campaign in Trinidad--a motorcade, a wake over which he presides with gifts of coffee and biscuits, and a threat of "obeah" which he nullifies.

The author points out that there is no separation of religion and politics in Elvira, and that the control of any bloc of votes gives instant bargaining clout. Since it is common knowledge that all Hindus will vote only for the Hindu candidate, all blacks for the Negro candidate and so on, Baksh, who controls the Muslim vote, threatens to take away that bloc of votes if he does not get a loudspeaker or a van. Harbans is also surprised that Lookhoor, a Hindu, would declare his support for Preacher: "[B]ut I is a Hindu...Lookhoor is a Hindu. Preacher is a Negro."[11] Belonging to any party is not a guarantee of belief in that party's platform.

Foam, who becomes Harbans' campaign manager, does so for selfish, utilitarian reasons. He had hated not having Lookhoor's job as mobile announcer for the cinema, but now he has a loudspeaker of his own and works "not so much for the victory of Harbans and the defeat of

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[11]V. S. Naipaul, The Suffrage of Elvira (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 19.

Preacher, as for the humiliation of Lookhoor and Teacher Francis" (p. 40). Petty jealousy and implicit prejudice, both racial and religious, make the entire situation a farce as exemplified by Mahadeo's going from house to house looking for sick or dying Negroes so that Harbans, a Hindu, can pay their medical bills and win the Negro vote.

The Suffrage of Elvira ends on a note of withdrawal and dissatisfaction as does the previous novel. Harbans pays one last visit after he wins the Elvira election, but his new Jaguar is burnt by some unknown arsonist and he concludes, "Elvira, you is a bitch" (p. 206), and determines never to visit the village again.

Miguel Street, the next fiction work after The Suffrage of Elvira, offers the best examples of satiric characterization and humor on the literal level. Laughter, warmth, and human variety temper the harshness of existence which is soberingly close. The reader, however, is more aware of the possibility of "imminent extinction"[12] than are the characters in the novel. They do not perceive their very eccentricity as isolating them and limiting their development as individuals.

Bogart, named after the movie star whom he imitates,

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[12]These words are Ralph Singh's analysis of the human dilemma in The Mimic Men but are applicable here.

[13]V.S. Naipaul, Miguel Street (New York: The Vanguard Press, Inc., 1960), p. 16.

is a "man...among we men"[13] according to his friend Hat. He acquires a "pure American" accent in a matter of months and "completes the imitation by being expansive towards children" (p. 15). One supposes expansiveness towards children to be a trait monopolized by Americans. When Bogart is subsequently arrested for bigamy, the reader decides that he has carried expansiveness a bit too far.

Popo is accepted by the inhabitants only when he gets drunk and threatens to beat his friends. He is liked by them even more when his wife leaves, but once she returns the camaderie disappears. The people of the street feel cheated for they can no longer dispense free advice and sympathy. They feel no moral indignation when he is caught for stealing, but they are disappointed that he should get caught! It is the same easy tolerance shown to Edward's practical joke.

This bit of trickery occurs when Edward lures several of his friends to Cocorite to catch crabs in the swamp with cutlasses and shovels. He calls the police who come armed expecting to find a murder in progress. When the trick is found out, the others do not retaliate. Naipaul, commenting on this characteristic attitude of ebullience and irresponsibility, calls it "a tolerance which is more than tolerance, an indifference to virtue as well as to vice."[14]

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[14] The Middle Passage, p. 58.

Tolerance is also shown to Hat when he beats his wife, Dolly, almost to death. The narrator says at Hat's trial: "We couldn't find it in our hearts to find fault with him. We suffered with him" (p. 211). The same is true of Laura, the fecund mother of eight children by seven different fathers. There is mute acceptance that "if Laura have she way, she go try every man once" (p. 110), and what the narrator remembers is not that she was immoral, but that she was the happiest and the most generous person on Miguel Street. A special brand of marital generosity is evident when Mrs. Hereira, whose real name is Christiani, leaves her husband and moves into the vacant house with Toni, her boyfriend. When Toni's beatings become unbearable, for he is drunk all the time, Mrs. Hereira moves just as easily in with her husband. She knows he "will be glad to have me back" (p. 143).

The rest of the novel exposes an unquestioning acceptance of all things, good or bad. It is typical among the uneducated to believe--what is to is must is--that somehow one has little control over the course of one's life. Someone, somewhere else has the ultimate responsibility for fortune or hard times. In a country where most of the population is descended from slaves or indentured laborers, this is not surprising. Those who dare all to chance are turned sour. Elias fails his high

school Cambridge examination two out of three times because "the English and litricher" (p. 41) beat him. He is not responsible. His hope of a career in medicine gives place to the satisfaction of becoming "one of the street aristocrats" (p. 45), a driver of a scavenging cart.

There is only one logical ending for the book. The cumulative effect of the narrator's experiences with others, including the disintegration of his friendship with Hat, leads up to it. The narrator, the link between all these variables, leaves for England. He pays one last visit to Miguel Street when his plane is delayed for six hours. It is a disillusioning return for "everything was going on just as before, with nothing to indicate my absence" (p. 222). If one interprets this departure as a sign of his disenchantment, one agrees with the reviewer who says the work is at first "merely engaging and amusing; then the mood subtly alters, the comedy turns acrid, and we wind up feeling a little sad about the men and women at whom we have been laughing."[15]

Unable to gain respect through hard work, honesty, and adherence to a strict moral code, the people of Naipaul's first three works assume with remarkable ease a number of roles. Ganesh pretends to learning by buying

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[15]Dan Wickenden, New York Herald Tribune Book Review, May 22, 1960, p. 10.

numerous books. Harbans promises to marry his son to Dhaniram's daughter knowing that he will not keep the promise. Big Foot, a friend of Hat, looks dangerous and acts tough because everyone expects him to be that way. He is really afraid of something as harmless as a puppy.

When Naipaul looks behind the facade of Trinidadian society in the first group of his novels, he finds only emptiness and ambivalence. The world which he sees is similar to that faced by the sixteenth century Spanish "picaro." It is an "ugly world, a jungle, where the picaroon hero starved unless he stole; here the weak were humiliated; where the powerful never appeared and were beyond reach; where no one was allowed any dignity."[16] As in Naipaul's case, flight is imperative. It is impossible to stay and remain unaffected.

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[16] The Middle Passage, p. 79.

CHAPTER III

THE ASSERTION OF HOPE

One reviewer of Naipaul's first novel, The Mystic Masseur, felt that he was "not entirely equal to the strain of a full-length novel."[17] A House for Mr. Biswas, published a scant four years later in 1961, shows that he is capable of a full-length work as he examines the subtle changes in Biswas from schoolboy to journalist.

It is evident from the first few incidents, especially when he allows the calf to drown in the pond, that Mohun Biswas is not one of the single-faceted characters of Elvira or Miguel Street. He is forced to live by his wits, not having either money or lineage on which to depend. If he were any more conniving, he would be simply a character from Miguel Street, but Biswas is aware of the absurdity of his own situation, in his own family, in Arwacas as an in-law of the Tulsis, and later plays the clown, but he never forgets what he is doing.

The main action of the novel focuses on Biswas' troubles. The events of his life throw into sharp relief his struggle to own a house, the symbol of his control of his immediate environment and his personal indentity. Like the paste necklace in the French story which Biswas tells his wife, the house which he finally buys from the solicitor's clerk has more flaws than he can fix. It is paste, but he is unaware of its falsity until he has bought it.

Curtains hide gaping doorways, electric lights mute the drab, sparse furnishings, but Biswas and his family learn to live with the house and the clerk's duplicity. Such trickery as is employed by the solicitor's clerk in selling the defective house to Biswas is more typical of the characters of the first group. The fact that Biswas does not respond with physical violence is a sure sign that Naipaul's hero is maturing.

Biswas exemplifies the traditional attitude toward learning. Though the author says of Trinidad that "the class structure is so fluid as to be almost non-existent,"[18] it is still necessary to have a foothold on the ladder. So education is sought "for its pragmatic value" since any "knowledge is good only insofar as it is useful."[19] Anand, Biswas' son, drinking milk and eating prunes to improve his mental capacity, is the symbol of Biswas' having moved away permanently from the muddy backyards of his youth and from the country children who wore vests but left their bottoms exposed. Education is the only means of upward mobility for the Biswas family. It is important for Anand to win the scholarship for the sake of his whole family.

Even as a sense of community is impossible among

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[18] V.S. Naipaul, The Overcrowded Barracoon (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1972), p. 1.

[19] Robert Hamner, V.S. Naipaul (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1973), p.22.

the Tulsis, and Biswas and other Tulsi in-laws, so by analogy it is with all of Trinidad. Gerald Moore in his book The Chosen Tongue says while "creolization" is one of the principal themes of Naipaul's novels, "it is one process he generally laments, since he sees it as one of loss rather than transition."[20] If the reader interprets creolization as meaning the process of becoming West Indian and not specifically or identifiably Indian, African, Chinese, Portuguese or any of the other groups that have come to the West Indies, then it is not loss but advancement. It is because the Tulsis hold on to the traditions of India and do not wholeheartedly give themselves up to being Trinidadians that the family disintegrates. The Shorthills adventure, when they attempt to reestablish a family house in a new setting, is bound to fail even before the family leaves Arwacas and Hanuman House.

Another of the reasons for the break-up of the Tulsi family is the rivalry of the members of the household. No one is allowed any dignity more than the rest. Those who have even a little must be brought down to a common level. Thus, when Biswas brings home a dollhouse for his daughter, Savi, at Christmas, it provokes ill will among the other Tulsi children and adults as Savi now has something they do not possess. It causes her mother to

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[20]Gerald Moore, The Chosen Tongue (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), p. 6.

smash the dollhouse publicly, and, Naipaul implies, somewhat foolishly.

Shama Biswas' importance is totally dependent on her relationship with her husband, Mohun. Away from his influence, she becomes just another Tulsi as Biswas discovers whenever she returns to Hanuman House. Her expectations are precisely those of her sisters: "Ambition, if the word could be used, was a series of negatives: not to be unmarried, not to be childless, not to be an undutiful daughter, sister, wife, mother, widow."[21] She expects to unquestioningly fulfill some function. When her husband argues with the others at Hanuman House, Shama adopts the role of the martyr, and the other Tulsi women play their respective roles. The words which the reader associates most often with Shama are "gloom," "despair," and "silence."

Her position is naturally dictated by Hindu practice. Her marriage is arranged, as is Leela's in The Mystic Masseur, and the doolahin's and Nelly Chittaranjans in The Suffrage of Elvira. Mrs. Tulsi is an excellent portrait of the Hindu matriarch. She manipulates her family with her illnesses, but her power is very temporary. When Seth, one of her sons-in-laws, leaves, she

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[21] V.S. Naipaul, A House for Mr. Biswas (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 160.

seems to lose all control of the family until another son, Owad, returns from studying medicine in England. In this work as well as in the previous novels, the men are the ones to whom the female characters look for real direction. Liberation is a long way off for Naipaul's female creations.

Naipaul's next novel, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion, is a delightfully funny account of one man's survival in the face of great odds. What makes the book a further development of Naipaul's view of man is that Mr. Stone is able to overcome the monster of retirement and the accompanying feelings of boredom and uselessness. The reader may question the permanence of Mohun Biswas' achievement because of his death, but there is no such question in Mr. Stone's case. He survives.

The book moves in circular form from an opening encounter with a black cat to a similar meeting at the end of the novel. In the first encounter, Mr. Stone is afraid of the black cat whose "depthless eyes held him."[22] This fear causes him to use liberal amounts of pepper on his plants among which the cat likes to dig. Eventually it is "as if cement had been mixed with the earth and dusted on to the leaves and stems of plants" (p. 6). On one occasion he waits, poker in hand, at the end of a trail of cheese cubes for the offender, only to remember

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[22] V.S. Naipaul, Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1963), p. 5.

later that it is rats not cats that have a predilection for cheese.

Mr. Stone's main avenue of contact with other human beings seems to be through Mrs. Millington, his housekeeper, as he moves from his house to his office and back again. Out of this neatly ordered existence stacked away much like his sister Olive's pudding bowls in his cupboard, he is shaken by marriage to Margaret Springer. Events like the discovery of her false teeth in the bathroom prompt the realization on Mr. Stone's part that "all that was solid and immutable and enduring about the world, all to which man linked himself...flattered only to deceive" (p. 53). He feels cheated and annoyed because Margaret is also not as witty as she has appeared on first acquaintance. Instead of bringing new vitality to the routine that is his life, she proceeds to mould herself around his actions as the dutiful and inspiring wife. There is much underlying irony in Mr. Stone's daily escapes from house to office, a kind of "brave bull going forth day after day" (p. 43), while Mrs. Millington does the housework, and his wife rests after sending him off to the office in the morning, in the afternoons in order to prepare to receive him, and at night so that she can have the proper amount of beauty sleep.

Mr. Stone's proposal to utilize retirees to keep

in touch with old pensioners is really a contingency plan for his own retirement. It is born out of real pain and fear of boredom. Once the idea proves feasible, Mr. Stone is simply relegated to "staff" and Whymper, younger and more energetic, adopts it as his own promotional gimmick for their firm of Excal, "ignoring the pain out of which it was born" (p. 125). Thus, recognition of his one notable deed is denied Mr. Stone.

The change in his interest in the cat parallels an identification with it as a mortal being. He finds around him other analogies of rebirth and hope, but to any surmising about the transience of life, Margaret's sole reaction is "it's a lotta rubbish" (p. 147). He seeks reassurance that his years of productivity are not over. She offers not inspiration but despair, and thus forces her husband to conclude that "nothing that came out of the heart, nothing that was pure ought to be exposed" (p. 49). If Margaret cannot understand this plea for help "there remained to him nothing to which he could anchor himself" (p. 149).

Structurally, the action of the book is framed by the two scenes with the cat. Through these Naipaul asserts that there can be meaning to life if the individual imposes it. Mr. Stone must face the cat and overcome his fear of it. The circumstances of his second meeting differ in

some important ways. The cat is younger, a symbol of rejuvenation and springtime. Mr. Stone has seen the original animals disappear and even watched one cat in its death throes. He is older, married. Mrs. Millington, on whom he has leaned heavily in the early chapters, has been dismissed. But Mr. Stone is optimistic "that in time calm would come to him again" (p. 160).

Margaret, Like Leela and Shama, falls into the first category of Naipaul women. Though she is not a Hindu, she is still subservient to the male wish. She is content to remain in the background though "secretly she might mock, but of this nothing escaped her in speech or expression" (p. 41). Mr. Stone simply recreates his former routine after his marriage, converting habit into ritual with the minor distinction of having "willing acolytes" in Margaret and Mrs. Millington. Naipaul uses the relationship between this husband and wife in the same way that he has used the Biswases--to demonstrate the basic isolation of all people, even those who have a steady job, a companion, and a home.

Mr. Stone's fears are not the ridiculous fears of a Big Foot or a Harbans, but they arise out of an urgent need for understanding. Perhaps with Margaret's help this serenity will come sooner, but survival is a matter of individual effort. Naipaul is careful to omit Margaret

from the final scene--"in the empty house he was alone" (p. 160). One reviewer suggested that the pefect conclusion escaped Naipaul.[23] In a sense this is the perfect conclusion. If human life is shaken by intimations of mortality, as Mr. Stone's is, then the achievement of serenity must be done without another's help.

Where Biswas gets a house as a symbol of permanence, and Mr. Stone finds inner peace, Ralph Singh of the next novel. The Mimic Men, affirms his basic self in the reconstruction of his past life in the novel.

His recounting of his early life in London shows that when he first came to England, he possessed the West Indian facility for becoming what others expect. For example, Lieni, who lives in the same building, remakes him into her lost Indian officer. Singh feels that that fact "imposed no obligation,"[24] but he has already fulfilled his part by allowing her to think of him as a past lover. He deliberately cultivates the notion that he is a flirt because this her opinion of him. Through numerous encounters with prostitutes, each pressing him "deeper down into emptiness" (p. 28), Singh's only "act of heroism" is to "maintain his cummerbund and well-brushed hair" (p. 28).

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[23] Times (London) Literary Supplement, May 31, 1963, p. 385.

[24] V.S. Naipaul, The Mimic Men (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969), p. 21.

From the broader vision that he acquires since his exile from the island of Isabella, he can say tongue-in-cheek that there was "heroism" in his actions when in fact there was none.

Singh also perceives in retrospect that he had slipped into marriage with Sandra, seeing only what he wanted in her. He had not seen "those close-set, myopic, impatient eyes, that jutting lower lip" (p. 45), and he sees the mistake of his having viewed her as all that was positive. She had suggested marriage, and he had apologized for not having proposed before. Naipaul suggests cryptically that it was not until afterward that Singh remembers that Sandra painted her nipples.

The group that they eventually attach themselves to on the island of Isabella is composed of professionals who had studied or married abroad. They consume large quantities of champagne and caviar "for the sake of the words alone" (p. 55). They are sophisticated young moderns who adequately play the part, and as Naipaul concludes in another book "will not buy what they think is cheap."[25] In this way they attempt to restore order to the chaos that is their lives, but it is only Ralph Singh who sees the folly and feels the proximity of imminent extinction.

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[25] The Middle Passage, p. 52. See also the news items which record this fraudulent modernity on pp. 48, 58, 65-66.

As a young boy, Singh has had to deal with the problem of self-effacement and indirectness. In school, as he says, "My ideal was to be brilliant without appearing to try" (p. 113). He wants to be like the Negro student of A House for Mr. Biswas who wins the scholarship while pretending not to study and who becomes consequently someone to be admired. In The Mimic Men, when Singh's sisters want to see him run on sports day, whether out of shyness or indirectness, though I believe it is for the latter reason, he cannot tell them simply that he does not want them to go. He invites an argument. Finally, he is able to get what he wants when they decide to have nothing to do with him as punishment. Eventually, I think, Singh deciphers that it is this very indirectness which is partly responsible for the disarrangement of life on the island: "To be born on an island like Isabella...was to be born to disorder" (p. 118).

The writing of the book enables the exiled Singh to return some sequence and regularity to his life. There is a mood of quiet acceptance and peace within himself and the other inhabitants of the London hotel. They, like Singh, have simplified their lives. The realization that emancipation is not possible for all" (p. 208) is not a statement of damnation but of analysis, obviously made by Naipaul through Singh, and an indication of the darker

vision of the group of works. What has saved Singh is his cognition of human frailty, a cognition which other characters in the book lack. Writing permits him time to integrate that inner core of identity which has remained untouched throughout his role playing.

His wife, Sandra, is another part of that life of role playing. The longer she stays on Isabella, the more resentful and introverted she becomes. Her rejection of community and family, in England and later on Isabella, is a negative one prompted by fear of the danger of the comonness around her: "She hated the common...about which she therefore claimed to speak with authority; no one knew 'them' as well as she" (p. 44). Yet ironically, while rejecting all that was common in those around her, she is herself from a very common background in England. She has a gift of phrase for "letting simple words harden into settled judgments and attitudes," (p. 65) a characteristic more typical of the unsophisticated than those who speak "with authority." Once she perceives that she has nothing to offer the island or its people, she concludes that they have nothing to offer her: "I suppose this must be the most inferior place in the world...Inferior natives, inferior expats" (p. 69). In dismissing them as all inferior, she reveals her own deep-seated feeling of inadequacy.

But Sandra functions well in the satiric structure of the novel because she serves to show how people can isolate themselves. While Singh says that he and Sandra were "compatible, even complementary" (p. 69), they are growing more and more distant. She cultivates relationships that go nowhere though "she wished to go beyond" (p. 68). The question is, beyond what, for she is only able to give a very small part of herself. Even Wendy Deschampneufs, who grows closest to her, terminates their friendship by snubbing her openly in a restaurant. Her immature reaction is the racially motivated reminder of the days of enslavement by the French. "The Niger is a tributary of that Seine" (p. 80).

Singh gives an excellent self-analysis of his situation as a colonial politician when he says that it "satirizes itself, turns satire inside out, takes satire to a point where it touches pathos if not tragedy" (p. 209). There are no truly tragic figures in the early works, but there are moments of deep pathos in the lives of Biswas, Stone, and Singh.

The short story collection, The Flag on the Island, published in the same year as The Mimic Men, represents a return to the picaresque convention of Miguel Street.

Aunt Gold Teeth, of the story of that name, is a

superstitious Hindu woman who burns a Catholic candle before her Hindu images, offering "as she thought, prayers of double efficacy."[26] The central character of "A Christmas Story" is a virtuous convert to Christianity who feels disgrace in everything he has previously done, but who experiences no remorse when the school that he has built is burnt down before the inspectors come to examine it. He had considered burning it down himself. Youngman, the Grenadian, of "The Baker's Story" realizes that "though Trinidad have every race and every colour, every race have to do special things" (p. 144). Since blacks will not buy from other blacks, in true picaresque fashion, he changes his name to Yung Man, puts a Chinese-looking clerk up front, and marries a Chinese woman from Cedros. Needless to say, he prospers.

But is the title story which is most important. John Wain, who has reviewed several Naipaul books, says it is a "sharp yet sentimental fable on the theme of social and cultural change within a small community, and the strange things it does to individual lives."[27] What the three tourists, Frank, Leonard, and Sinclair go through is an absolute nightmare of experience with people begging, idling, drinking, and in effect without

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[26] V.S. Naipaul, A Flag on the Island (London: The Trinity Press, 1967), p. 15.

[27] New York Times Book Review, April 7, 1968, p. 4.

the least inclination to fulfill the slogan "Pride, Toil, Culture" which is their motto. I must agree with the reviewer who comments that "on the surface is the good story, underneath are so many layers of meaning, so many sly comments on human foibles that the title story overrides the stipulations made for it."[28] The stipulations are contained in the sub-title, "A Fantasy for a Small Screen." It overrides fantasy because of what tourism has done to the Caribbean. It has created islanders who are almost parasitic in their reliance on what the tourists will give. Similarly, Naipaul is directing his comments not only to the small screen of the West Indies, but he is also describing something that has taken place all over the world.

The novels of this second group assert hope that one can establish a meaningful life amid chaos. Biswas struggles and fails at times, but he keeps advancing. I think that when he dies he has achieved a meaningful life. The house is no mansion, but it is his own. Mr. Stone loses his idea to Whymper and becomes just another member of the Excal staff, but he can see his retirement and the rest of his life in a different light. Singh, though banished from the island of his birth, has made life simpler

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[28] Pamela Marsh, Christian Science Monitor, March 29, 1968, p. 13.

and found some measure of inner peace. No matter how many levels of meaning one discerns, the ultimate level is one of hope.

CHAPTER IV

THE DARKER VISION

The ideas of this last group differ radically from those of the first and second. In the first group, the society is static and there is little awareness by the characters of the need for change in themselves. In the second group, the characters are aware of the absurdity of existence and impose positive meaning on their lives. In the third group, there is a sense that man has ultimately little control of his happiness, and that any optimistic assertion of hope may impose meaning only for a short period of time.

The stories of the work In a Free State are all connected by the themes of exile, freedom, and prejudice, but the title story is the most important to the development of the thesis. In the story, the author examines in greater detail the nature of man's freedom.

The story is set against a backdrop of rain which represents the very real ignorance, poverty, and fear of those who come into contact with Bobby and Linda, the main characters. Naipaul uses every opportunity to examine the order which colonialism brings, and to question what happens when its restrictions are removed. Freedom, as it is apparent to Naipaul, depends on the existence of restriction.

All the characters are limited by greed, cruelty,

and a dependence on the physical. As one critic puts it, they are all "prisoners of the alien cultures around them."[29] The blacks are the prisoners of the colonial culture, and the whites are ever aware that they are in Africa, "the dark continent," No one is really free, least of all Bobby, limited by race and homosexuality. The blacks we meet individually, like Peter, are "fresh from the bush," and seem to support the idea of The Mimic Men that not everyone can be emancipated. The dog pack, growing in strength and boldness as its number increases during Bobby's and Linda's walk, represents a centrifugal destructive element. The ultimate end is chaos.

It is with chaos that Naipaul deals in his last novel, Guerrillas. Though there is a tendency to dismiss this novel as gimmicky because Naipaul uses the three "devices" of sex, race and English characters which he vigorously deplored in 1958,[30] Guerrillas contains the author's darker vision of the human dilemma.

There is a sense of the unreal, a party mood "with ten thousand radios playing the reggae"[31] which belies the seriousness of the political situation on the

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[29] C.K. Larson, Saturday Review, 54 (October 23, 1971). 91.

[30] The Overcrowded Barracoon, p. 13.

[31] V.S. Naipaul, Guerrillas (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975), p. 30.

island. Paul Theroux says that the action is "a series of shocks, like a shroud slowly unwound from a bloody corpse."[32] The light-hearted comic perspective of the early novels is absent. In its place there is a kind of brooding pessimism.

There is no villain or hero, but the four main characters assert some important attitudes to the world. The first character is Jimmy Ahmed, deported from England and now leader of the commune of Thrushcross Grange. He is an ironic study of the blind leading the blind. Those "boys" who have stayed with him have "nowhere to go" for they were children "casually conceived...and gradually abandoned" (p. 31). Unable to transcend his own history of casual conception--born of a Negro mother and a Chinese father "in a backroom of a Chinese grocery" (p. 18)--he attempts to offer security to others like Bryant. Peter Roche's analysis, that Jimmy is merely looking for someone to lead, is entirely correct. He does not make a move toward leadership until Stephens is shot and he senses that the people need someone to lead them. Leadership, in this case a commitment to more chaos, is Jimmy's way of working out his hatred for all society which has twice rejected him, at birth, and later in England.

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[32] New York Times Book Review, November 18, 1975, p. 1.

Yet amid the confusion of values which constitute his life, Jimmy seems capable of some truth. In his long letter to Marjorie, his ex-wife, he says: "I used to think that childhood was just a time of disguise and that it was going to be all right when I became a man, what a laugh Marjorie what a laugh," (p. 261) and thus accepts the destruction of the naivete of childhood, and of a more mature hope as well. He attempts to transfer the blame for his trouble with the authorities in phrases like "you let me down," "you made," "you people sent me back," and "you sided with the others" (p. 264). He sees himself in this situation as the wronged and unwilling participant of misfortune.

The reader wonders if he is doing the same thing in his relationship with Jane. Jimmy commits himself, however, to utter chaos, "that void" (p. 281), when he willfully participates with Bryant in Jane's murder. With this action he renounces all claim to being messiah/savior "carrying the burden of all the suffering people in the world" (p. 39).

If there is any messiah figure in the novel, it would have to be Meredith. He emerges as Jimmy's strongest antagonist. The fact that he does not commit himself to chaos is further evidence of this. He is happily married and successful in his radio talk show. Though

aware that he is "living in a house without walls," he remains untouched by that knowledge. He lives, we are told, "as though the opposite were true" (p. 151). He prefers to think that he has dropped out of politics and not been rejected. He has a lucid analysis of society: "We're born as blind as kittens in this place. All of us. We can see nothing and we remain like that even when we are educated, even when we go abroad" (p. 162). It is an analog which works for both him and Jimmy, and for Peter and Jane who have gone "abroad" by coming to the island. On a larger scale "this place" as the entire world has even further reaching implications for the human condition.

Roche sees rage and unappeased ambition lying behind Meredith's apparent domesticity, but Roche is not a reliable judge. His doubt may in effect be the result of the instinctive antagonism which Jane feels towards Meredith, instinctive, and therefore without reason. When they ask themselves what they desire most in the entire world, only Meredith asks for something meaningful. Harry de Tunja asks for his errant wife; Peter requests enormous sexual powers; Jane asks for money. It is Meredith who asks that be be able to express himself fully.

At the end of the novel, Meredith does get the opportunity to do just that. Knowing that "he will be

chewed up" (p. 171) by the political machine, he still becomes a minister. This perhaps is the Naipaul version of the Hemingway code of grace under pressure, that this place--earth--"can be blown down, and this is all he's got" (p. 179). When Meredith leaves for the last time, he acts out his exit. It is role playing, but this time the stage is the universe and Meredith has the full knowledge that all men are merely players anyhow.

Once Naipaul describes Peter Roche as "slightly clownish" (p. 2), we cannot take him seriously. In the farce that is his relationship with Jane, and in his work as a representative of the service organization, Sablich's, he becomes a kind of buffoon figure and accepts the role that is assigned him. The relationship with Jane has obviously deteriorated, but he prefers to remain with her. He sees that the activity of labor in the field near Thrushcross Grange is deliberately "laid on" (p. 6), but he discusses the success of the commune with Jimmy, even as he stands in knee-high weeds. He knows about Jane's death but says nothing. Like Jimmy and Meredith, Roche acts in spite of what he perceives.

The absurdity in Roche's case is an obvious one. His novel on which his entire reputation is based is misleading, but when people come to us "with reputations made abroad we tend to look up to them" (p. 237). His

entire existence is built on sand, as he realizes at the end. Naipaul hints that Roche is extremely naive not to realize that he cannot become something somewhere else until he has answered the question he himself has posed, "O God, why is any of us allowed to live at all?"

Jane, the "dragon lady" (p. 17), is a caricature of woman without function in her tight trousers and see-through blouse. She is "white enough to be unreadable" (p. 7). Is there some hint perhaps of the unknowability of a Moby Dick? To penetrate this surface is to find only a chaos of words and attitudes "without consistency or coherence" (p. 20). Her pretensions to stability and opinion are absurd, but she lacks a sense of the absurd and so is unable to see her folly. Casual nihilism becomes a part of her unassailability.

Through her, Naipaul makes his most telling commentary yet on women. All of Jane's life seems to revolve around her relationships with men. Because her expectations have to do with somebody else, there are many avenues of possibility open to her: "Anything can happen to her. But it's out of her hands. It all depends on this man who's going to find her" (pp. 166-7). Neither wife, mother, nor friend, she is without function. In place of real feeling, which one sees as a necessary adjunct of the wife/mother orientation, Jane settles for

rejection of her ex-husband and Roche as "dull people... sheep being led to the slaughter" (p. 109). Her final meeting with Jimmy Ahmed when he judges her to be "rotten meat" (p. 275) is a caustic comment on her uselessness. Death is her final act of futility.

Adela, the housekeeper for Jane and Roche, acts as a foil to her mistress. She acts positively in the face of crisis, making deliveries of sandwiches to the men down at the police station. She has her religious belief in Handy Byam and an unquestioning support of law and order on which to depend. Jane has nothing.

Of Guerrillas, Benjamin DeMott writes: "There are novels whose failure tells us more about where we are, what we've cut loose from, and what the cutting-loose costs...looked at as political fiction Guerrillas is one of them."[33] I do not agree that the novel as fiction is a failure, because it tells us more than any previous Naipaul fiction of what he believes to be the true state of man's freedom. When all the restrictions are removed, we pay the price of confusion, both moral and political. What lies at the heart of man is not a stable core but chaos when civilization is erased.

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[33] Saturday Review, 3 (November 15, 1975), 23.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

Without Naipaul's very real concern with Trinidad, what he writes is mere capitalization on the fact that he is an exotic, an Indian writing in a strange brand of English. But as he has said, "[F]iction or any work of the imagination, whatever its quality, hallows its subject."[34] Naipaul's fiction adds much to the myth that is the Caribbean's, but the ultimate object of his satire is a less localized human improvement.

The reader cannot help noticing that the society of the last novel is not that of the first. The society of The Mystic Masseur asks no questions because ritual and tradition have dictated all the answers. The message of Guerrillas is clear. There are no simple answers because there is no single, indentifiable enemy: "The enemy is the past...and a society uneducated from top to bottom."[35] The shapers of human existence are not some mythic other one but oneself and one's unwillingness to question why any of us is allowed to live at all.

It is Meredith of Guerrillas who correctly asserts that "madness keeps the place going" (p. 157). Each character in Naipaul's work seems to have his own particular brand of it, though the definition of madness

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[34] The Overcrowded Barracoon, p. 25.

[35] Ibid., p. 250.

changes somewhat. There is no single proponent of Naipaul's view. What his characters seem to say collectively is that presented a problem of choice in the face of imminent extinction, man must act.

In 1958 Naipaul wrote, "The social comedies I write can be fully appreciated only by someone who knows the region I write about."[36] That was nineteen years ago. It is evident that in the interim this has changed. What Naipaul now has to say transcends the limit of national boundaries. The overcrowded barracoon is the world and we are unaware of it.

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[36] The Overcrowded Barracoon, p. 11.

CHRONOLOGY

1932 Vidiahar Surajprasad Naipaul born on August 17.

1950 Left Trinidad for England.

1957 Published *The Mystic Masseur*.

1958 Published *The Suffrage of Elvira*.

1959 Published *Miguel Street*.

1961 Published *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

1962 Published *The Middle Passage*, a record of his tour of the West Indies at the invitation of the government of Trinidad and Tobago.

1963 Published *Mr. Stone and the Knights Companion*.

1964 Published *An Area of Darkness*, a non-fiction work about India.

1967 Published *The Mimic Men* and *A Flag on the Island*.

1969 Published *The Loss of Eldorado*, the story of the end of the search for El Dorado and the British-sponsored attempt to use Trinidad as a base for revolution in the Spanish Empire.

1971 Published *In a Free State*.

1975 Published *Guerrillas*.

1977 Published *India: A Wounded Civilization*, an impressionistic look at India before the election which gave India its first non-Congress Party government.

At present V.S.Naipaul continues to live and write in England.

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